



Minnesota's canoe country sees drop in visitors

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By Sam Cook, Duluth News Tribune



By Sam Cook, The Duluth News-Tribune via AP

A paddler carries a canoe up to the portage trail in Duluth, Minn. Visitor use in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness has dropped about 12 percent over the past six years.

DULUTH, Minn. — Cathi Williams can see the change in use of the Boundary Waters over the years.

"Definitely, there's a downturn," said Williams who has owned Bear Track Outfitting Co. in [Grand Marais](#) with her husband, Dave Williams, for 38 years.

Visitor use in the [Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness](#) has dropped about 12% over the past six years, according to [U.S. Forest Service](#) figures.

Overnight trip reservations in the Boundary Waters dropped from 39,304 in 2003 to 34,000 last year, according to U.S. Forest Service officials. With an average of four people per group, that means the number of overnight visitors dropped from about 157,000 to about 136,000 in the same time period.

Across the border, in neighboring Quetico Provincial Park in [Ontario](#), visitor use has dropped

by at least one-third since 1994.

Outfitters blame the drop in BWCAW use to changing habits of vacationers, increasing dependence on technology, fewer young people using the wilderness and an aging baby-boomer population.

Dave Seaton of Hungry Jack Outfitters on the Gunflint Trail north of Grand Marais said his business peaked in 2002.

"That was our best year ever," he said. "Not that it's been a steady decline since then, but it just hasn't been as good since then."

But not all outfitters are seeing a decline.

"Our business has been steady," said Bill Hansen, owner of Sawbill Canoe Outfitters north of Tofte. "We had record years the last two years."

BWCAW reservations so far this year are down compared to the same time last year, said Sandy Skrein, public service team leader for Superior National Forest. As of May 25, 18,602 reservations had been made, compared to 20,278 on the same date last year. Some canoe outfitters say campers are waiting longer to make reservations than in past years.

The Boundary Waters remains the most popular and most visited wilderness area in the country. Although most of the use is by Minnesotans, people come from all over the country to paddle and camp in the wilderness.

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While overnight use of the BWCAW has dropped, day use has increased slightly for paddling and hiking, and offseason use from October through April also has increased, according to the Forest Service.

Permits for those uses have risen from about 11,000 in 2001 to 14,325 in 2008, the last year for which complete data is available. Average group size for those permits is three, meaning the number of those visitors has risen from about 33,000 to about 43,000 annually.

The average age of day-users is 49, compared to 45 for campers, according to a 2007 survey of BWCAW visitors.

Both Williams and Seaton said fewer young people are camping in the BWCAW.

"We're not seeing the youth groups and the families with young kids," Williams said. "The baby boomers are still coming. They're changing to [Kevlar](#) canoes because they're easier to lift."

She thinks the demands of organized summer sports are keeping kids out of the woods.

"Even elementary-age kids. You'd think they were professional athletes. You can't miss a practice or you can't play in the games," she said.

Seaton has seen the same kinds of demographic changes.

"We definitely see fewer groups of young people coming," he said. "Our regulars are definitely getting older. We don't see as many people bringing the whole family as we did 10 years ago or 15 years ago."

The advent of the Internet also has been a deterrent to wilderness travel, Seaton said.

"People need to be more connected," he said. "Some people can't go someplace on vacation where they're completely disconnected from their work and their friends."

People's trips are becoming shorter, and many want to make a base camp and do day-trips from there rather than traveling every day, said Nancy Moundalexis, a Forest Service wilderness ranger at

Ely. Steve Schug, a wilderness and recreation program manager for Superior National Forest agreed.

"I'm 100% sure people are not taking the kind of trips they took even a decade ago," Schug said, "where they do eight-day trips and covered 100 miles."

Many users are relying on technology as a backup, carrying GPS units that transmit their location and can be used to signal an emergency, Schug said.

"They want to think there's help for them readily available," he said.

The downturn in the economy starting in 2008 has affected people's vacation plans, but Forest Service officials maintain that camping in the Boundary Waters remains a good option for many.

"In these economic times, an experience in the Boundary Waters, even though there's a fee to get in, is a bargain for what they get," said Jim Sanders, supervisor of Superior National Forest, which manages the 1.2-million-acre wilderness.

Boundary Waters trip fees are \$16 per adult and \$8 for youth 17 or under for the entire trip. Reservations for an overnight trip are an additional \$12 per group.

The Forest Service does no direct marketing of the BWCAW as a tourist destination.

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"We let it speak for itself," Sanders said.

However, the Forest Service, in cooperation with Gunflint Trail outfitters, last year started a program called "Becoming a Boundary Waters Family." Seminars by outfitters and Forest Service employees are aimed at helping families and children feel more comfortable in the woods.

Visitor use at Quetico Provincial Park, the canoe-country wilderness just north of the BWCAW in Ontario, has dropped by one-third since 1994, according to park officials. Use peaked in 1994 at 130,338 camper-nights. But in 2007, the last year for which figures were provided, use had dropped to 87,388 camper nights.

Park superintendent Robin Reilly said the downward trend in visitor use has continued in the past two summers, although he declined to say how much.

In the past decade, camping fees in Quetico have risen to \$20 per adult per night for non-residents entering from the U.S. Starting in 2008, Quetico prohibited the use of live bait and barbed hooks for angling, further discouraging some visitors. In addition, the value of the American dollar has declined compared to the Canadian dollar, making Canadian travel less of a bargain for Americans.

About 75% of Quetico use comes from U.S. citizens, Reilly said.

"A family of four, especially if they have older teenage kids, is paying \$80 a night just to camp," said Dave Sebesta of Williams and Hall Canoe Outfitters in Ely. "And I think a lot of that (declining visitor use) could be related to the fishing regulations."

Reilly said park officials are concerned about declining visitor levels.

"Revenue is a good thing," he said. "We hope to earn it. But our primary responsibility is looking after the park. We do typically err on the side of the environmentally appropriate policy rather than the economic side."

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